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ABSTRACT

The principle underlying public higher education in the US is that while learning helps the individual, it is mostly for the benefit of the economy, society, government, and culture, and therefore society should bear most of the cost of such education. Public education is being threatened today by national and state proposals that the student be required to pay the full costs of his education. But with such a requirement, public higher education as it has traditionally existed in this country would cease to be. One may assess the values of public higher education by considering three words: (1) Opportunity. The goal of public universities involves excellent education for the many rather than the few. Despite tax and other pressures, low fees have prevailed, and today they are fundamentally tied to current pressures for providing opportunities for low-income groups. (2) Relevance. Land-grant and other state universities, which were set up to provide opportunities and practical curricula, not only developed professional education along with general education but linked research theory with practical work to improve the human condition. (3) Involvement. Public institutions have never endorsed the ivory tower, but have sought to link public service to teaching and research, to educate adults, and to render service to those who could not attend institutions of higher education. (WM)

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NASULGC PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS
by
Fred Harvey Harrington, President of University of Wisconsin
Tuesday, Nov. 11, 1969

WE MUST SPEAK OUT FOR PUBLIC HIGHER EDUCATION

It is time for us to speak out for public higher education. It is time to say that we are proud of being public universities, responsible to the public and publically controlled.

It is time to say that the public university is deep in the American democratic tradition, has contributed greatly to the material well being and the fundamental liberties of this republic and has earned the right to respect and support.

It is time to say that the historic pattern of the public universities is relevant today. This is a pattern of mass education, which is necessary and desirable now and for the future. This is a pattern of opportunity as well as excellence, a pattern of low cost to the student, so that higher education will be within the reach of the poor as well as the well-to-do. It is a pattern of practical education, relevant education, education for life as well as in theory. It is apttern of applied as well as fundamental research. It is a pattern of involvement in the economic, social and political life of the community, a pattern of public service and problem solving.

This is the Land Grant concept, a century old, a public higher education partnership between the federal and state governments in the national interest. Most of the institutions here represented are Land Grant Colleges. Some are not. But, Land Grand or not, all of us are in the Land Grant tradition of mass education, education for the less advantaged, practical and applied as well as theoretical and general learning, public service as well as teaching and research.

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All of this may sound rather obvious. We all know that our association is basically an organization of public universities; but we do not sufficiently emphasize the public aspect. We do talk about the special problems of being

public---cirticism from citizens of our states ("I am a taxpayer," the letters begin(; attacks from elected officials; difficulties with our governing boards in these days of student unrest. But we seldom talk about the values of public higher education. Too often we leave the discussion of values to spokesmen for privately-controlled colleges and universities.

Some say that this whole topic is not worth considering, since public and private institutions are drawing together, getting to be more alike. After all, the private institutions are obtaining lots of public money. The research and training programs of the private universities are supported (just as are ours) by the federal government. (Indeed, the federal government share of the budger of the major private universities is greater than the federal government share of our budgets.) State governments, too, are providing increasing support for students attending privately controlled colleges and universities, and are beginning to support private institutions directly. And, whild the private sector is securing more public money, we of the public sector are raising increasing sums from private sources---individuals, corporations and foundations.

Does this wipe out the line between public and private higher education? Does it mean that we now have the same values? Private university spokesmen don't think so. They say that they need public support so that they can remain private. They say that it is a tragedy when privately-controlled institutions go public---as Buffalo, Houston and Knasas City have done, to cite three members of our own association. Spokesmen for private higher education state that there is something valuable, something special about private colleges and universities, something essential to the American system of free private enterprise. They see themselves as in a period of crisis, and are are worried about the survival of the private institutions. They predict that the end of the private system of higher education would be a blow to diversity and excellence, a blow to fundamental freedom, a turning toward uniformity, mediocrity, a disaster for the republic.

Some of us may resent the "Mediocrity" and "Uniformity" charge. It is important, though, to recognize that the leaders in private higher education see value in their system and see it as distincy from public higher education.

Why, then, don't we talk a little more about the values of our system?

To do so is not to attack private education. We all know that diversity in higher education has benefitted the United States. We are all proud of the contributions of the great private universities (certainly I am, as a third generation Ivy League). We all appreciate the role of private higher education in building academic freedom and excellence. We also know that private higher education has been getting better. In the old days the atmosphere was oppressive at many religiously dominated private colleges. This is changing. And, not so long ago, many of the best private institutions could be properly accused of being elitist, of serving only the very best minds, and mainly only the vest minds from the upper and upper-middle classes. That too is changing, and rapidly. Previously, many private spokesmen attached public higher education as inferior, or as useful for handling those not good enough to go to private schools. This attitude is giving way gradually to something closer to mutual respect.

Obviously, then, we must retain private higher education; we must support deserving privately controlled colleges and universities, and see to it that they do not go under.

But what about ourselves? There is all sorts of talk about the threatened extinction of private higher education; virtually none about the possible death of public education. But it is threatened, too, seriously, critically, now. It is threatened by national and state proposals that the student be required to pay the full-costs-of- instruction. Oh, he might get it or some of it back--- in income tax returns over his whole lifetime, or, if he is poor enough, in payments bearing some relationship to his lack of funds or to the poverty of his family. We have already seen a few of these schemes. We will se more in Washington and in our state capitols.

The charge-students-full-costs would of course mark the end of public higher education as we have known it. We in public higher education rest upon the democratic principle that while learning helps the individual, it is mostly for the benefit of our society, economy, government, culture. Thus society should bear most of the cost of this education. If we abandon this principle, if we require the student to shoulder the full cost, we bring the end of public higher education in the American tradition.

Well, we will fight. But we can fight more effectively if we stress the values of public higher education. They are clear, strong values, and they fit this age, with its demands for opportunity, relvance and involvement, with the current thrust toward solving the problems of poverty and prejudice, the problems of the environment and the world.

Consider the three words: Oportunity, Relevance, & Involvement.

Opportunity: Public higher education stands for excellence and Opportunity. We always have; we do today. The Land Grant system was set up to provide educational assistance for the poor of Lincoln's day---mechanics and small farmers. All the state universities have this in their background; the goal of excellent education for the many rather than the few.

We have never done the job to perfection; and many of us slipped rather badly in the first half of the 20th Century. With the private institutions leading many public educators became enamored of the word excellent; and some came to boast about how many young people were denied admission to their campuses; and how many were kicked out for academic reasons. We never did become elitist; but while properly stressing excellence, we gave too little notice to our opportunity tradition. This association brought out a booklet -- Margin for Excellence--- intended to defend us against charges that the private schools have all the top quality, and we had what was left. A reissue of this pamphlet is now entitled Margin for Excellence and Opportunity. This is the proper label for us.

This endorsement of opportunity means that we are in favor of mass education and that we buy the words of a University of Kentucky President, "Bless the Coming Millions." Blessing all these students has its difficulties. But we do not believe in staying small. We believe in growing, since the nation needs trained young people and since we serve the nation's needs. We believe in inclusion, not exclusion. We believe in mass education as a positive good, in terms of living standards, democratic philosophy and the quality of life. This is an old approach, but a good one for today.

Since we believe in opportunity, we of course want to hold down charges to students. Many of us favor no fees or tuition; the rest of us favor low fees, low tuition. We are pressed today to abanon this ground, what with the pressures of taxes and the new schemes for loading costs on the students. To some extent, we have retreated. But low fees are fundamental to the cause in which we believe, and fundamentally tied to the current pressure for giving lower income groups greater opportunities.

While we have lost some ground on fees, we have gained in another way. If costs to students are to be kept down, we must provide higher education opportunities close to home. The commuting college is a must---the commuting college, carrying with it expectations of excellence and opportunity. Our states and localities, with some federal help, have made this a reality in the past generation. We and the members of our sister organization (the American Association of State Colleges and Universities), and the public community colleges have in fact provided public undergraduate, graduate, preprofessional and adult education in the cities and in less populated areas, through branches, new campuses and new institutions. This is one of the present generation's great moves toward equality of opportunity, one of the great historic accomplishments of public higher education. Why don't we boast about it a little more?

Relevance: The cry today is for relevance, ie. for learning that is related to the real world of today. Here again, our public university tradition has value.

The Lnad Grant and other state universities were set up, not only to provide opportunity, but also ina reaction against the impractical curricula of existing colleges, heavily weighted toward theology, the classics and traditional learning. This start helped account for our early development of professional education, alongside of general education. As research came to the campus, the public universities tended to be practical again, to link theory with application, to join fundamental, basic, pure investigations with the practical applied work that improves the human condition. Today you can find in our institutions a great deal of the purest research, and teaching of subjects for removed from contemporary problems. This is good, but we do retain (and we should boast about it) and the tradition of applications, the tradition of being practical, relevant and interested in getting things done.

Involvement: This is another aspect of the same thing. It is significant that some American students today are demanding thorough reforms; that while apathy still reigns with many young people, more and more are getting interested in public questions and want to serve. Along with this goes the growing belief of most adult Americans that the nation must face up to the great problems of the day. In such a situation, can the campus be removed, can it be an ivory tower.

The essential point is that we in public higher education have never endorsed the ivory tower. Our institutions have always talked of public service as being linked to teaching and research. We are the universities that have favored carrying reaearch results to the people. We are the universities that have beam interested in solving problems, in educating adults, in rendering service to those who could not attend the university.

Our record has not been uniformly good. We have done better on the farm than in the city. We have succeeded more often overseas than in the ghetto at home. We have failed to give our public service people---our extension personnel---the status and recognition that they deserve. But we do stand for the problem-solving approach, for the role of the university as an agency to participate in the real world.

Lately the private institutions have been seeing that this approach has merit, and are talking about involvement as something new. It is not new to us; but we must emphasize it, talk about it, and make it work better than in the past.

There it is----the public university, the center of action and contreversey, freedom and opportunity, relevance and involvement. There is much to do. We need support, we face threats to our freedom. But we stand on a great tradition; the central tradition of American higher education. It is time to realize that and to speak out for the public university.